

## HISTORY

A chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history.

-- Walter Benjamin

Warren Sonbert's works are about human construction (i.e. civilization) and light. Dramatic mood swings, cool analysis are guided by light. His eclectic sensibility has often made me think of some early moderns, their exhilaratingly comprehensive intellects poised between 19th c. cataloging of knowledge and the complexity of 20th c. self-consciousness. Sonbert's films reflect both his iconoclasm and encyclopedic knowledge, serving not only as chronicles but also as constructions of an encompassing articulation of divergent events in which light serves as the romantic, or melodramatic, mundane, serene, soft, or tragic host to the image's (high, low, typical, historical) providence : the dissolution of borders in Eastern Europe with military and trains under low darkened skies, a chemist with test tube fading in blue light, a tabby in daylight on the verandah or prowling under a lamp, an over-exposed golden prima donna behind the scenes, the under view of a bridge in shadows (are a few images recollected from middle and later period films). With no image diminishing an other and each contributing to a construction of future-feeling or future-looking that serves what I think of as both grounds for meditation and provisional revelation, there are no simple outcomes in the films' cumulative effect.

Zola vs. Balzac, Vertov vs. Eisenstein, some little gem of a film, Monteverdi, a new book of poetry, an aria, an operation, ingredients of a stew, Proust: the fluid traveling back and forth between canonical art, the everyday and present cultural invention inherent to Sonbert's sensibility traveled likewise in discussion and affected my view of his films. Disturbed by the

19thc. naturalist's biological determinism, I would argue with him about Zola's value. He would respond by saying, (pointing to a particular novel) he sustains relentless images of greyness, greyness his characters can't escape. Now, some of the shots in Sonbert's later works, each time I see them, remind me that he read Zola. Warren engaged in and did not shy away from analysis or interpretation.

#### FILM AND LANGUAGE

He spoke materially, allegorically, operatically, psychologically, biographically through his films: his visual rhetoric was readily accessible as the basis for poetry because of its clarity, rhythms, layerings, shifts of scale.

After seeing *Divided Loyalties* once, I decided to make a poem out of the next viewing of the same film. I wanted to see how film might translate into poetry and what the temporal rhythms would do to the poem spatially. What would I find through this act of translation in the dark?

Serenity on top of the

city goldfish

(And of course much more)

Warren's work, so comprehensively constructed, and as true as any public event, building, picnic, or masked ball, made the assignment easy, almost too easy.

street

right-city lights

## THE FLANEUR

I was thinking about that stanza (street/right-city lights) a few days ago, wondering if it would be right to say that Warren Sonbert is The Flaneur of independent film. Then my husband, Barret Watten, somehow out of the blue - but these things are never really out of the blue-- said Warren was the Baudelaire of independent film. Thus for this brief take, let this be the case, that Warren could be thought of as a global flaneur with his passion for crowds and seeing allegory in anything. For his urbane interest in all things human-made and their instabilities.

"The crowd is the veil through which the familiar city lures the flaneur like a phantasmagoria. In it the city is now a landscape, now a room," writes Benjamin on Baudelaire. It could have been written about Sonbert as well.

## MECHANICAL EQUIPMENT/THE OLDEST DREAD OF ALL

"Magician and surgeon compare to painter and cameraman. The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web. There is a tremendous difference between the pictures they obtain. That of the painter is a total one, that of the cameraman consists of multiple fragments which are assembled under a new law. Thus, for contemporary man the representation of reality by the film is incomparably more significant than that of the painter, since it offers, precisely because of the thorough-going permeation of reality with mechanical equipment, an aspect of reality which is free of all equipment. And that is what one is entitled to ask from a work of art." (Benjamin)

The responsibility that Sonbert undertook in using mechanical equipment to permeate reality is exemplified in his demand his students that one can not be a filmmaker without watching Brackage's *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes*. Through the lense of his 8 mm. camera,

the filmmaker watches the most dramatic illustration in film I know of that which is free of all equipment, the bodies in a morgue, undergoing the surgery of autopsy. Upon overcoming the dreaded confrontation with the corpse, what one most movingly and peacefully witnesses is that which is free of all equipment. Sonbert was willing to risk losing students to speak to this necessity. Baudelaire addressed it as well in a poem to artists:

There are some who have never known their Idol; and those sculptors damned and branded with humiliation, who turn the hammer against their own breast and brow have one hope only, one strange, dark Captiol: the hope that Death, soaring aloft like a second sun, will enable the flowers of their mind to bloom at last.

#### SONBERT'S EARLY WORKS

Benjamin writes in One Way Street:

Come Back! All IS Forgiven

"Like someone performing the giant swing on the horizontal bar, each boy spins for himself the wheel of fortune from which, sooner or later, the momentous lot shall fall. For only that which we knew or practiced at fifteen will one day constitute our attraction. And one thing, therefore, can never be made good: having neglected to runaway from home. From forty-eight hours' exposure in those years, as in a caustic solution, the crystal of life's happiness forms."

Sonbert's early works demonstrate the value of running away from home (this is not meant biographically but metaphorically): although they are a step ahead, reflecting the man in the youth and the youth in the man of the city in a room in the mind of a near-child. We are lucky he started so young. Precociously positioned with his momentous lot, Sonbert's sophistication was a blessing that has left us with a plenitude of extraordinary works, of which the first two represent accomplished initial examples and the third, a great leap.

*in today's  
scenery*

- Carla Harryman  
6/22/95